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## Organisational professionalism and moral courage

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## **Organisational professionalism and moral courage: contradictory concepts in social work?**

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### **Background**

Professionalism is a contested concept in social work. For example, Evers, (in Munday, 2003, p13) states:

Summing up one can say that professionalism has two sides: one side may be the often-complained arrogance of power while the other side is the burden of responsibility taken. The latter side can be a good point of reference for those who strive for a better user involvement. To the degree that professionalism puts clients' interests first it can be a strong antidote against old and new ways of putting the interests of authorities, business and providers ahead of the concerns of users and citizens.

The point being made here is that professional social workers, notwithstanding that they may also have the power to be authoritarian or paternalistic, can embrace responsibility for decision making and autonomy and can do so on behalf of, and with, the service user. Although the concept of 'professionalism' in social work has also been debated in relation to many associated issues including the place of care, gender influences and semi-professional status (for example, Meagher and Parton (2004), Phillips and Cree (2014), Etzioni (1969)), this paper takes, as its focus, the idea that an essential element of professionalism is the stepping up to decision making, autonomy and advocacy or, in other words, Evers' 'burden of responsibility.'

Evetts (2003, p407) illuminates this analysis in her discussion of what professionalism has come to mean in a context of neoliberal managerialism. She states that the original appeal of the professions was the 'power to define the nature

of problems in that area as well as the control of access to potential solutions.’ Given the shift in social work to purchaser/provider in community care, tightening of resources in every social work sphere and the plethora of diagnostic and risk assessment tools, procedures and rules it is easy to see that the ‘appealing’ definition of professionalism is decreasingly appropriate in relation to social work practice. In fact, Evetts (2003, p406) goes on to say that the reality of professionalism may be more akin to ‘the substitution of organisational for professional values; bureaucratic, hierarchical and managerial controls rather than collegial relations; budgetary restrictions and rationalization; performance targets, accountability and increased political control.’ In this context, then, how easy is it to take on Evers’ ‘burden of responsibility’? If the power to ‘define the nature of problems...and control access to potential solutions’ lies elsewhere, probably very difficult indeed.

The centrality of knowledge in professional social work is a largely accepted idea. Munro (2011), in her review of child protection, for example, was very clear that an aim of the review was to reduce prescriptive practice and increase the level of knowledge and skill of social workers to facilitate increased autonomy. Therefore, an important feature in defining or understanding problems and solutions *and* stepping up to responsibility (professional practice) is the vital place of knowledge within those endeavours. Without critical understanding and knowledge of social work theory, legislation, policy and ethics/values, a worker cannot begin to understand the nature of problems nor to think about help and solutions. In fact, Morley and Macfarlane (2014, p340) state that the ‘lack of theoretical rigour and grounding is seen to be directly related to social work’s loss of professional autonomy and standing.’ Also, attempting to argue on behalf of a service user or to advocate for services, help or assistance is more difficult without real, theoretical and value based knowledge to support the argument/advocacy.

Evetts (2011) brings further analysis to this idea by differentiating between ‘occupational professionalism’ where values, definitions of problems and solutions are the business of, in this case, social work as a profession; and ‘organisational professionalism’ where the locus of control lies with the agency and the priorities are managerial procedures and techniques, budgetary imperatives, performance management and audit. Liljegren (2012, p308) notes that ‘occupational

professionalism' has its focus on the service user and draws on knowledge concerned with understanding the service user's issues (a social work theoretical knowledge and value base), whereas 'organisational professionalism' is concerned with the bureaucratic structure of the organisation and looks to organisational rules and procedures as the primary source of knowledge. Knowledge as described earlier would therefore not be required to anything like the same extent in 'organisational professionalism' as it would in 'occupational professionalism.'

Sheedy (2013) also suggests that professionalism in social work should be characterised by a knowledge base, social work values and a commitment to social justice which can maximise the benefits of real collaborative work with service users. He terms this 'crossing the professional boundary' (Sheedy, 2013, p46) and the concept can be seen to echo the idea of 'occupational professionalism,' taking on the burden of responsibility by drawing on knowledge and values beyond organisational, bureaucratic rules and procedures and firmly situated within scholarly and critical thinking and understanding; leading to work *with* service users. However, Sheedy also recognises that a significant obstacle to 'crossing the professional boundary' arises by 'embedding the professional identity within the organisational identity' (ibid). In other words, 'organisational professionalism' can supplant 'occupational professionalism' or identity and erode real collaborative and knowledgeable practice.

The question which arises at this point, then, is: are social workers frustrated by being thwarted in their desire to take on 'the burden of responsibility' or are they disinclined to want to take on that burden? Do they strive for 'occupational professionalism' or do they settle for, and accept, 'organisational professionalism'? In his discussion of social work students, Preston-Shoot (2011) states that they are overly concerned with procedural knowledge and less interested in the professional knowledge required to help them understand the service user and their issues. In other words they can become 'overly identified with bureaucratic imperatives and lose sight of allegiance to social work goals' (Preston-Shoot, 2011, p 189). Akin to this, Preston-Shoot (2012) found that social workers did not draw on ethical and legal knowledge as a matter of course, but instead, once again, relied on agency procedures and ways of working. Reisch (2013) also states that social workers have been 'compelled...to revise their relationship to the state, the market, service users and the community' and points out that the emphasis on measurable goals and

efficiencies (elements of 'organisational professionalism') has led to social workers attending much less to structural analysis and understanding of service users' issues. Preston-Shoot and Reisch's concerns raise an issue for social workers across the board and highlight the erosion of autonomous, knowledgeable practice in the profession in general.

Building on this, Fenton (2014) found that younger, less experienced workers objected significantly less to the neoliberal and managerial direction of social work than their older, more experienced colleagues. The author suggests that many students enter their programme of study with neoliberal frames of reference firmly in place and, often, social work education fails to challenge them to a sufficient extent. Sheedy (2013) also states that many social worker students have no knowledge of, or interest in, political thinking which can lead to a focus on interpersonal social work only, with little connection to wider issues of politics and social justice. Those students then enter a profession as new workers, where practice is increasingly driven by neoliberal imperatives and by an increasing focus on individual behaviour change and accountability, and may conform very easily. Fenton, also found less experienced workers were also less likely to want more autonomy. Once again, those findings are congruent with an increasing adaptation to 'organisational professionalism,' managerialism and neoliberalism.

It can be suggested at this point, then, that social work as a profession may be increasingly accepting of 'organisational professionalism' as its professional framework, as indicated by the absence of, or deficiency in, robust and accessible bodies of knowledge and in the desire to use said knowledge autonomously. This would include ethical knowledge and values, legal knowledge and the critical theoretical underpinnings required to understand social injustice and to work with oppressed and disadvantaged people.

Another indicator of 'organisational professionalism' would be a tendency to seek guidance from senior members of agency staff and to follow their instructions, rather than formulate an autonomous response based on ethics and knowledge. Dale and Trlin (2010, p129), in their study of probation officers in New Zealand, found that 'having decisions backed' by managers was of crucial importance to workers:

Number one ingredient is support, backing. Everybody in the course of their employment makes decisions....having someone behind you who supports and backs your decisions creates a really good working relationship' (Dale and Trlin, p130).

Conversely, Gregory (2010, p2279) in a study of experienced probation officers found dissatisfaction with the lack of autonomy in the role, and the increasing requirement to share decisions with managers.

So, what might be going on here? Is the picture one where workers feel frustrated about the lack of autonomy, as Munro (2011) suggests:

Decision-making on cases is frequently the responsibility of that manager, despite the manager not knowing the child or family very well, if at all. This leaves the social worker in an awkward predicament, holding case responsibility but with little autonomy for decision making (Munro, 2011, p. 115).

Or do workers, perhaps, enjoy sharing responsibility with their managers whom they rely on for interpretation of agency requirements and values as suggested above?

To contextualise that question it is worth looking at social workers' relationships with their first line managers more broadly. Morazes et al. (2010) in a study of social workers in California, compared workers who stayed in the field of child welfare with those who left. They found that the most important factor in determining who would stay was a good, supportive relationship with their first line manager. A poor relationship with a first line manager was also crucial in workers making a decision to leave. Likewise, a study by Smith et al. (2010) considered the experiences of 569 new employees within an organisation and their findings highlighted the importance of validation from team members and the team leader. Messages and feedback particularly concerning the workers' actual practices as well as opinions and views were very important to the worker making a commitment to the team and organisation. For example: 'Once an individual becomes identified with a group, he or she may also develop a commitment to the group and internalise its goals, culture, norms and values' (Smith et al., 2010, p46). The authors also highlighted the importance of identification with the organisation, as distinct from the team.

Surprisingly, they found that identification with the goals and aims of the organisation was more important (in terms of retention of staff) than identification with the team. Therefore, feeling a sense of belonging to a team and sharing their values and culture was important, but feeling the same kinship with the wider organisation was even more so. On joining the organisation, a new worker may be 'unsure of the true nature of the organisation or..... ambiguous about how he or she feels about working for the organisation' (ibid. p49). Against this background, Smith et al found that 'team leader validation positively predicted both team satisfaction and organisational satisfaction. It appears that team leaders can simultaneously be a representative of the local team and be a representative of the organisation' (ibid. p58). It seems, therefore, that there is a 'sense-making' function for a team leader in terms of the new worker's socialisation. Sluss and Thomson (2012) echo these findings and suggest that their study provides 'evidence that the supervisor.....is an integral relational source for newcomer attitudes such as identification, fit and satisfaction' (Sluss and Thompson, 2012, p120).

It seems, then, that the role of the team manager in terms of acculturation of workers is extremely important. There may also be a theme emerging where social workers, and younger, less experienced social workers in particular, appear to be relying on their team managers for decision making support and for interpreting what is important for the organisation. Once again, this requires little recourse to bodies of theoretical social work knowledge and values and is, instead, congruent with ideas of 'organisational professionalism.'

Shanks et al (2015) undertook a study of social work managers in Sweden and found that they identified themselves as social workers who had taken on management roles rather than as managers. The authors highlight this as an important distinction because it leads to sharing of values and goals with basic grade social workers. This resonates with Evans' (2011) point that because many managers are drawn from the same pool as basic grade social workers, they share the same values and professional commitment as those workers. However, the authors also found that the managers were internally focused on doing the required tasks, to the detriment of retaining a focus on the external context of social work or on the strategic direction of the organisation. This was due to the prioritisation of bureaucratic and administrative functions, a result of managerial developments

which the authors state are felt even more acutely in the UK. In terms, then, of 'organisational professionalism' if managers are important in decision making and defining priorities for workers, there may be clear prioritisation of internally focused issues and this may be unambiguously conveyed to social workers.

In summary, then, if 'organisational professionalism' as opposed to 'occupational professionalism' is indeed progressively characterising social work, then it may be that workers are turning to team managers and local procedures for direction and are being readily supplied with direction which has accountability to the agency, rather than to the service user, as its priority. The place of theoretical and ethical knowledge which would be essential to understanding and advocating for the service user is very much downgraded in that context.

## **The study**

The findings under discussion in this paper are taken from a wider study of criminal justice social workers (CJSW) in Scotland (Fenton, 2015). Ethical approval was obtained from the University of Dundee's research ethics committee and permission was obtained from the four participating local authorities. The study investigated the concept of ethical stress, that is, the stress experienced when social workers cannot base their practice on their values. Although the site of study is specific to Scotland, the findings are relevant to social work in any location where neoliberal managerialism has had an impact on practice. Ferguson (2008, p2) states that since the 1970s, 'neoliberalism has become the 'common sense' of most governments throughout the world' so it can be assumed that the ideas in this paper will resonate widely.

Quantitative and qualitative data were collected via one hundred returned questionnaires. Quantitative data were statistically analysed to explore connections between variables and the experience of ethical stress, and free text comments were invited at the end of each section and at the end of the questionnaire overall. Statistical analysis demonstrated that workers' perceptions of risk aversion within agencies and value-poor ethical climates of agencies contributed significantly to the experience of ethical stress. For more information on the study see Fenton (2015).



An inductive analytical approach was originally taken to the qualitative data (free text comments) which involved 'sorting' the data "whereby essential themes [ . . . ] are allowed to emerge from the data [ . . . ] based on their regularity or prominence" (Smith, 2009, p. 167). On revisiting the data for the purposes of this study, however, a deductive approach (Carey, 2009) was taken, in that the data were interrogated for comments in relation to the theory that 'organisational professionalism,' as opposed to 'occupational professionalism', is playing a central role in social work practice. Comments reflecting the following themes were examined: views on procedures and local knowledge; the importance of the first line manager; and comments about drawing on a social work, 'occupational' knowledge base.

## Findings

### Theme 1: Procedures and local knowledge.

Positive comments about the first theme were as follows:

*There are times when I fail to follow procedure....however, this is rare and always discussed with my line manager.*

*I think it's a positive change in practice that work is based upon structured risk assessment tools*

*Procedures are sound*

*Procedures are there for a reason*

Less positively:

*Pressure is on to risk assess everyone, at the expense of getting to know, and work with, clients.*

*Conscience pricks me when have to do lengthy admin tasks when time could be better spent working with people.*

*The focus has definitely changed and there is much priority placed on meeting performance indicators, recording first appointments etc.*

Social workers in this study therefore had mixed views about procedures and local policy. They felt positively at times, but were also aware that lengthy bureaucratic tasks take time away from working with service users.

## Theme 2: Role of first-line managers

Over 10% of all comments made were related to the second theme - the role of the first line manager. Within those comments, two sub-themes emerged: comments in relation to supervision/support/values and comments in relation to decision making and risk.

### Managers: Supervision/support/values

Very positive comments were made in relation to team managers sharing the same values as respondents. This applied to supervision as well as more widely:

*My senior is excellent and we can discuss our values, ethics*

*Supervision content is dependent upon the senior. My senior is excellent and we can discuss our values, ethics and receive encouragement to be autonomous. However, this is not a managerial point of view*

The opposite was also apparent:

*Supervision can be totally one-sided at times and focus on clients' risk assessments/reviews/procedures rather than welfare*

*The focus (of supervision) has definitely changed and there is much priority placed on meeting performance indicators, recording first appointments etc*

*Although managers do seem to have an awareness of the importance of worker-client relationship, nonetheless the primary focus is on meeting targets and performance indicators*

Quite clearly, then, we can see the themes from Shanks et al's (2015) study playing out in the comments above. Where team managers were able to remain outwardly focused on values and ethics and to understand the importance of worker autonomy, they were viewed by social workers as 'excellent.' 'Values and ethics' emerged as a theme from many of the comments in relation to team managers and beyond. Less positively were comments about managers whose priorities were internally focused on targets and bureaucratic, administrative imperatives.

#### Managers: Decision making and risk

Many comments were made demonstrating that workers felt positively about sharing their decision making with team managers:

*My senior allows and encourages me to make informed decisions*

*There are times I haven't followed procedures, but always discussed with management*

*If I ever feel I cannot/should not follow procedures, I would discuss with my team manager and seek agreement that an exception should be made*

*There is a major emphasis on risk assessments and we constantly hear about defensible decisions. My senior allows and encourages me to make informed decisions that not everyone may agree with*

*Someone from the same agency but with a different manager may have responded differently*

No comments were made resenting this sharing of decision making or feeling awkward or uncomfortable about it. Also, only 30% of workers agreed with the statement 'I wish I had more autonomy' and only 16% with the statement 'If I ever

choose not to follow procedures, I don't tell my supervisor or manager' (Fenton, 2015).

### Theme 3. Drawing on knowledge and values beyond agency procedures.

*Structured risk assessment tools only add to the professionalism of my work, by giving a sound research base on which to base decisions*

*I feel we can, and do, consider values*

Very few comments were made in regard to knowledge, with the above comment referring to 'pre-packaged' knowledge which is distilled into the form of a risk assessment 'tool.' Such a tool is wholly dependent on a body of research which is not easily accessible for critical appraisal or utility as it is predetermined for use. Also, there were few comments made in terms of values, and little given to explain in what way the worker can explicitly employ values.

## **Discussion**

### **Organisational professionalism**

A picture is emerging that might cast doubt on Munro's suggestion that social workers feel awkward about their lack of autonomy. Instead, workers are, perhaps, happy to share decision making with team managers, especially if those team managers share a value position with the social worker and if they can be flexible and *allow* some discretion. Given that newer and younger workers are more comfortable than their older colleagues with the lack of autonomy and increased proceduralisation and standardisation of the work (Fenton 2014), possibly to avoid blame and to prioritise 'doing things right' (Munro, 2011); might it be that they are also happy to abdicate decision making to a greater degree than would have been acceptable in the past? Does the lack of negative comments about this illustrate that this is in fact something that younger, newer workers want and expect? Although it might be reasonable to assume that the desire to share or abdicate responsibility is simply a result of inexperience, and there is no doubt that this plays a part, Fenton's

study (2014) found that the *perception* of neoliberal influences was what made the significant difference. So, less experienced workers *viewed* their agencies as less risk averse than their more experienced colleagues. One very experienced worker, for example, stated:

*Work becomes more risk-led....at the expense of valuable preventative work....Risk is king and needs to take a back seat.*

These views were held to a significantly lesser degree by the less experienced, and younger, workers, so the difference was not just in the behaviour (seeking guidance, following procedures and avoiding autonomy) but also in the underpinning beliefs.

Whittaker (2011) undertook a study looking at child protection social workers' decision practices and found that decisions were often delegated upwards to team managers by the social workers. The author saw decision-avoidance techniques in action where, for example, social workers would describe a situation and leave a gap or a pause that the manager would then fill with a solution or a decision about what should happen next. Whittaker found that this strategy, which he viewed as a defence against anxiety, was less prevalent among more experienced workers. He found that more experienced workers reduced their anxiety by following their own judgement. Whittaker identified another anxiety-defence strategy to be repeated checking that a decision was the right one. Again, this is a clear sign that the worker is uncomfortable and unconfident about their decision. Finally, and again very tellingly, the third strategy was dogged adherence to specified procedures and 'not being required to make a choice and thus incur the burden of decision-making' (Whittaker, 2011, p 489). Interestingly, the social workers in the study also rated procedural knowledge as much more valuable than social work expertise knowledge. All of Whittaker's findings are congruent with the themes characterising an 'organisational professional' framework and are also consistent with Shanks et al's (2015) study where managers were, due to the administrative burden, preoccupied with internal, procedural concerns. Once again, there would be a growing 'fit' between what workers wanted from managers in terms of knowledge and what managers had in ready supply. This picture would also appear to chime with the findings from the current study. Rogowski (2011, p162) states that 'social workers are undoubtedly now more subject to the control and direction of managers; witness

the increase in the proceduralisation of practice, with practitioners now subject to ever more and intense direction and scrutiny.' Rogowski goes on to say that this increasing focus on efficiency and targets – internal, agency concerns – detracts, of course, from the needs of service users.

Interestingly, the idea arose from the comments that structured risk assessment tools can add to the professional feeling of social workers. This is termed the 'professional paradox' by Robinson (2003) who found that workers viewed the introduction of a new risk assessment tool as heightening professionalism on one hand and yet reducing it by undermining professional judgement, on the other. There is a seductive appeal in the seemingly scientific or evidence base of many risk assessment, and other, 'tools,' which social workers can employ with an uncritical confidence in their validity. These tools, however, are out of reach in terms of critical appraisal or critique and, thus, are a product of the managerialism of social work. As Morley and Macfarlane (2014) suggest, promoting this managerial shift in the name of professionalism has actually created a less professional social work profession by the forfeiture of the social work value base and of an explicit and critical knowledge base. Procedures and tools, indicative of 'organisational professionalism,' have taken their place. Rogowski (2011, p162) suggests that 'even if at times rules and procedures need interpretation and the application of some background knowledge, hence allowing an element of discretion, few would disagree with the proposition that generally they amount to an 'iron cage which limits practitioner discretion.' It can also be suggested that, according to the current study, the 'iron cage' does not cause a problem for many workers and, even when an element of discretion is allowed, many practitioners approach team managers to ask for direction, employ Whittaker's strategies or to have decisions 'backed.'

In summary, the reliance on tools and procedures, the reliance on first line managers, the dearth of comments related to an explicit knowledge base and the notion that newer workers might be quite comfortable with that situation, means that the neoliberalisation of social work, and attendant 'organisational professionalism,' looks very robust. Indeed, several comments were made which would actually suggest that some social workers have absorbed neoliberal ideas to the extent that

'organisational professionalism' would cause no problem whatsoever. A neoliberal understanding of service users, with no underpinning knowledge of oppression, disadvantage or social justice was, at times, apparent:

*This (offending) is through their choice.*

*Clients need to be responsible for what impact their behaviour has on victims....child protection/public protection takes priority.*

*(Clients need) to be encouraged to empower themselves.*

*The stress in the job is more about resistant clients and managing the risk they pose.*

These comments, more than anything, indicate that some workers are simply not drawing on a critical knowledge of social justice, understanding or values.

### **The current context**

In a study of newly qualified social workers (NQSW) (Grant et al, 2015), levels of confidence across National Occupational Standards for Social Work were measured. 'Managing complex ethical issues, dilemmas and conflicts' was rated as having the second lowest score out of 16 statements for combined 'confident' and 'very confident' categories. The only lower confidence measurements were 'contributing to the management of resources and services.' 46.88% of NQSWs rated themselves as 'quite confident' on managing complexity, which could be considered appropriate given that they are inexperienced workers. However, in the light of the previous discussion, it might also be suggested that NQSWs find strategies and methods for coping with complex decisions which involve some abdication of responsibility to managers. A contemporaneous study of first line managers' views of NQSWs, found that workers were felt to be unprepared for assessing and managing risk and

handling complex scenarios (Welch et al, 2014). Once again, the very early stage of development must be considered, but once again, complex decision making has emerged as a problem. It is also worth considering that it is in the first year after qualification, when new social workers do feel unconfident about decision making, that methods, strategies, priorities and parameters of decision making may be learned. If during this period, abdicating responsibility, prioritising 'safe' agency procedures and imperatives and always seeking instruction from managers are forged as acceptable work practices, then they might well persist and thus perpetuate managerial, 'organisational professionalism'. Attending decision making fora such as case conferences or review meetings, might also become opportunities for abdication of decision making responsibility whereby social workers relinquish responsibility for articulating what they think the decision should be and wait to be told what the decision is and what the resultant tasks are. Actually feeling responsible for what you think *should* happen and what you think the decision *should be* (for robust, well informed reasons underpinned by social work values, ethics and knowledge) is the domain of 'occupational professionalism' and, as such, may well be receding.

Alternatively, new workers may learn other, more autonomous, ways of doing things as they become more experienced. As mentioned earlier, however, the underpinning beliefs of newer workers in terms of acceptance of neoliberal and managerial shifts were significantly different to their more experienced colleagues which might give less cause for optimism that practice will become more radical and service-user centred over time.

### **Moral courage and sense of agency**

How does 'organisational professionalism' impact on social workers having moral courage (Morley and Macfarlane, 2014) and having a sense of agency which might facilitate their trying to do what they think it 'the right thing' as opposed to simply 'doing things right' (following procedures or instructions)? Action borne out of moral courage might include, for example, taking responsibility for, and arguing for, a preferred decision, advocating on behalf of service users even in the face of hostility and opposition, assertively arguing to deviate from agency procedures or cultural



norms and representing to management concerns and alternatives. These actions are in contrast to practice which is characterised by allegiance to the agency and following procedures. Morley and Macfarlane (2014, p352) found that critical reflection in social work education impacted positively on students developing moral courage, and feeling a sufficient sense of personal agency to take action against injustice. The authors found that the students in their study demonstrated a commitment to:

- 'Grappling with received ideas
- Questioning the internalisation of dominant discourses
- Challenging the presumed neutrality of 'facts' to examine alternative constructions
- Finding the discretionary space to work towards ethical, socially just outcomes for service users *despite* practice contexts that might be hostile to critical emancipatory aims' (emphasis added).

It can also be suggested that in order to do the above, social workers need to be able to draw on knowledge and to be sufficiently engaged with that knowledge to critically examine it. The acknowledgement that practice environment may sometimes require resistance rather than adaptation is also important.

O'Donnell et al (2008) found that action against injustice was more likely to happen if the organisational climate was conducive to this, and if ethics resources were available (supervision, support and discussion of ethical issues, for example). What this means is that in a culture characterised by 'organisational professionalism' taking ethical action is likely to be much more difficult due to the over-riding concern with internal aims and procedures and lack of attention to occupation values and ethics.

Fine and Teram (2012, p1313) conducted a study in Canada, analysing the views of social workers on ethical practice issues. The investigation into what motivates workers to 'stand up' to moral injustices and to take action to address them, is illustrated by the following quote from a participant:

‘I think it’s very important to know what you consider to be right and very important to speak up when you think something is not right and to explore it and to be willing to sort of be one of the few voices and not just go with the flow because everyone else is comfortable with it....’

The important point here is: ‘know what you consider to be right.’ This particular participant clearly has a working ethical knowledge and is thus informed and confident about ‘what is right.’ The implication is also there that ‘right’ might well include critical understanding of other forms of knowledge such as theory and law. This knowledge then allows the participant to argue for something different – and to do the ‘right’ thing. In other words, knowledge is leading to moral courage and action. Again, considering the idea that newer workers and students are more accepting of a neoliberal, managerial type of social work might mean that they do not easily ‘speak up when (they) think something is not right.’ They might either not see anything wrong in the first place (paucity of knowledge) or simply feel more comfortable with procedural practice and ‘how things are done here’ – leading to a redundant knowledge base. Preston-Shoot (2012) suggests that social workers in general are not sufficiently legally or ethically literate, in that they struggle to draw on legal and ethical knowledge in the working, day-to-day manner suggested as essential. In fact, he found that, instead, they relied on conformity to agency procedures as suggested above. In essence, Fine and Teram found that all respondents who could take ethical action had ‘a very robust sense of knowing what ought to be done’ and ‘the welfare of the client’ in common. Although taking action can be difficult and cause anxiety, these workers almost felt there was no alternative. They clearly understood social justice, knowledge about service users’ problems as being about more than just individual failings (and therefore requiring management and coercion) *and* were drawing on *occupational* values and ethics. They were able to untangle complexity and work out, as a social work professional, the right thing to do and were then able to argue for that. How different is that from a worker who’s understanding of a service user involved in crime is: *this (offending) is through their own choice?*

As well as lack of knowledge/values, Preston-Shoot (2012, p30) suggests a further reason why it might be that some workers (newer ones in particular) find ethical

action and challenge difficult. Using the experience of students as an example, he suggests:

‘Where workers are faced with incompatible expectations and multiple accountabilities, they tend to choose those priorities most likely to be approved by their managers.....Put another way, when being socialised into the profession, students often assume an identity similar to that of their mentors.’

At a time when managers and agencies are concerned, as a priority, with budgets and procedures, might this be the type of social work newer workers are socialised into?

What characterises those workers, then, who are able to choose a different path to the ones defined by agency, manager and mentor priorities? Stanford (2011, p1520) found, from a study of Australian social workers, that personal moral codes were the deciding feature about whether a worker would ‘advocate for and protect’ (ethical action) a service user, or ‘control and dismiss them’. Likewise, approaching service users with empathy and compassion were features of the ‘advocating’ group’s practice and absent from the ‘controlling and dismissing’ group’s practice. Also, a belief in the achievability of change and a praxis drawn from understanding of oppression and social justice were features unique to the ‘advocate and protect’ group. The features unique to the ‘advocating’ group were consistent with ‘occupational professionalism’ and, thus, might well be at odds with the organisation. As one respondent in the current study said: *I am in a very bureaucratic environment where engagement (with offenders) is viewed very disdainfully*. Clearly, social workers in some organisations would require real moral courage to challenge ‘organisational professionalism’ and would, thus, require a robust working knowledge, value base and sense of agency.

In terms of the importance of drawing on knowledge, Gray et al (2015) found that the social workers in their survey suggested that lack of time was the biggest barrier to getting to grips with evidence-based practice. This may well be true, if what is being suggested is that workers engage in systematic literature searches to find and

appraise original research before embarking on a course of action. However, the suggestion is actually only that it is part of the day-to-day work of a social worker to understand the evidence base that is already there for their work – and to be able to critically appraise and draw on it.

This, then, may well be the nub of the matter. If social workers have a working proficiency of social work knowledge in terms of understanding service users' situations, social justice and oppression *and* a readily available working understanding of social work values and what they mean in practice they should be able to draw on this as a default in all of their practice. However, if that understanding is weak and if social workers allow organisational, agency, procedural and managerial sources of knowledge to supplant it, then ethical action will be eroded and social workers will simply process and manage the people they work with. Ethical action is essential in an austere, neoliberal, individualised society to get alongside, help and advocate for the people social workers work with.

### **Individual differences**

Respondents in the current study showed consistent responses in regards to being happy to share decision making with first line managers. There was also consistently no mention of theoretical, legal or ethical 'occupational' knowledge. However, there were differences between workers in their acceptance of neoliberal frames of understanding, and in how procedures and bureaucracy were viewed.

Might it also be suggested, then, that these differences reflect differences in ethical literacy, workers' commitment to social justice and their critical understanding of a social work knowledge base appropriate to their setting? The literature so far seems to suggest that is the case. Respondents in the current study made frequent comments about the individual inclination of workers as follows:

*I believe that the service a client receives is largely dependent on the individual worker and their knowledge and motivation*

*The service given largely depends on the individual worker*

### *There is room for autonomy in individual sessions*

It might be suggested, then, that the advancement of an 'organisational professional' framework impacts on workers, but that some workers are able to retain a commitment to 'occupational professionalism'. The dangers inherent in increasing 'organisational professionalism' are 1. the erosion of moral courage and action which is extremely detrimental to critically informed, collaborative social work practice and 2. very poor practice which can flourish when workers only rely on managers' instructions, procedures and cultural norms to underpin their practice and do not think about the compatibility of that practice with *occupational* knowledge and values. For example, a BBC report outlines a case where a social worker added her name to a report that had been altered by her manager and then denied the existence of the original report in court – lying under oath (BBC, 2015). A consideration of the actions of the social worker and her manager easily demonstrates that such actions are unethical and, ultimately, illegal. Drawing on even basic occupational knowledge of standards would highlight the wrongfulness of the actions. However, the worker is described as 'an inexperienced social worker' and the manager as 'strong-willed, forceful and opinionated' (Cooper, 2015, n.p.), descriptions which make for the situation to be easily understood in terms of how much moral courage and understanding the worker would have required in order to demonstrate resistance to instructions. Interestingly, Norman (2015, n.p) compares a similar case from 2008 with the current case and states that, although the worker in the 2008 case was also newly qualified, she 'had the *courage* to question the unethical action she was asked to take' (emphasis added). Norman goes on to say: 'It is distressing to see that in this latest case, the cancer appears to have bitten deeper, with collusion between social worker and manager.'

Bogo et al (2016, p209) in their study of field educators' perceptions of students found what they considered to be 'ageism' among the participants in that 'some field instructors shared a belief that younger students are not as knowledgeable and prepared for field education as mature students'. The authors caution against sweeping generalisations about entire age-groups of people which is, of course, valid, but it may also be that the field educators *were* noticing a difference between

younger and mature students as several studies referred to in this paper have suggested. Accepting that there may be something of an issue, allows further exploration about what might be done about it in terms of social work education.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this paper has suggested that there are clear links between social work professionalism being increasingly defined in organisational, rather than occupational, terms and the difficulty social workers will thus have in taking ethical action on behalf of service users. The features, from the literature, that facilitate such action include a real working knowledge of what the 'right thing to do' is, which requires legal, ethical and theoretical knowledge aligned to 'occupational professionalism.' The suggestion, from the research study, is that this is being eroded by adherence to procedures and the prioritisation of bureaucratic tasks and decision-making direction from managers, congruent with 'organisational professionalism.'

Social work education needs to urgently engage with these ideas, especially as they may be affecting newer and younger workers more acutely. Said workers may be more vulnerable to the effects of 'organisational professionalism' and more ready to adapt due to a lack of critical, radical and political understanding and an acceptance of the neoliberal hegemony (Fenton, 2014); the socialisation process which takes place in agencies often already characterised by managerialism and 'organisational professionalism' (Preston-Shoot, 2012); and having been through an education process which perhaps did not explicitly focus on criticality, moral courage and agency (Morley and Macfarlane, 2014).

This has very significant implications for social work education. If the profession needs social workers characterised by an easily accessible, robust knowledge and value base, moral courage, a sense of agency to take action on behalf of the people they work with and a critical and reflective form of practice, then social work education must include these ideas as curricular and practice priorities.

If 'occupational professionalism' continues to be supplanted by 'organisational professionalism' then ethical action by social workers will become decreasingly

likely, even in the face of increasing neoliberal policies and procedures and increasingly hard and grim lives for many of the people social work works with. At a time when advocacy and action is urgently required, it may well be dwindling. 'Occupational professionalism' and taking on the 'burden of responsibility' is essential in the contemporary neoliberal context, whatever organisation employs the social worker.

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